

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CERTAIN PLANT NAMES

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Botanical terminology is filled with oddities. An ancient Roman would probably find much amusement in the atrocious Latinesque mongrels, denoting that Smith, Ph.D., found and classified the Something-or-other Smithii. However, in many common and technical designations there is hidden a veritable romance of linguistic adventure, where research leads across seas and sands to natural habitats and original appellations.

In giving derivation of English words and common scientific terms, dictionaries often stop with Latin or Greek forms. Occasionally, reference will be made to Arabic. Yet many Graeco-Latin words were dialectic modifications of borrowed Near Eastern terms which were names of articles of trade peddled by Aramean and Phoenician merchants.

The family, Boraginaceae, has generally been identified with the Mediterranean littoral and eastward. Littré (*Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*), speaks of it as a "Plante Sudorifique, originaire d'Afrique et introduite par les Maures en Espagne." It was long known for cardial and febrifuge properties. Gerarde (1597) noted that borage was used in salads "to make the mind glad." Britain's famed "cool tankard" combined the leaves with wine, water, lemon and sugar. Great healing power was accredited to borage. The roots yielded brown and purple dye.

If this plant or some special use of it was introduced into Spain by the Moors, an oriental ancestry of its name would be logical. The scattered variant forms are easily recognizable, as German *boretsch*, French *bourranche*, Italian *borragine*, Spanish *borraja*, Latin *borego*, and in all probability, Greek *pourakion*. Some have tried to connect the term with Latin *burra*, "a hairy cloth," or French *bourre*, "animal hair," since the group is notably hirsute.

Among the Arabs the plant is known as *barwaq*. Boiled with olive oil and vinegar it is a specific for jaundice. The root juice is used for skin eruptions; the juice of the leaves sometimes mixed with food "to cause excitement." In Zerolo's "*Diccionario Enciclopédico de la Lengua Castellana*," the Spanish *borrachuela* is described as causing "cierta perturbacion." Both Arab and Spaniard note the mild intoxication. Their terms are philologically related, the Arabic *q* passing over into Spanish *ch* and *j*, *borraja* and *borrachuela*, French *bourrache*.

Linguists long pondered over the origin of the Spanish term *borracho*, "drunk." Obviously it follows the same consonantal root pattern, *b-r-g/j/q/ch* always connected with some kind of exciting, mind-confusing state and a plant juice inducing it. An

Arabic word, *baraq*, means "to be confused," "weak," or "with eyelids immovable." A noun, built on the same root structure, *barqat*, means a "fit of confusion" or "blind perplexity." In Spanish, confusion of judgment is *borrachez*. Since Arabic *q* is formed back of the palate, it passes easily into Spanish *ch*, while the dental *t* as readily becomes a voiced sibilant, *z*.

Following the same intoxication motif, an Arabic wine basin is called an *ibriq*, and the Spanish leather wine bottle is a *borracha*. Again the familiar b-r-g/q/ch of borage is clear. In spring, every vivid patch of fiddleneck (the *Amsinckia intermedia* of Oregon and *A. Douglasiana* of California) or heliotrope, or forget-me-not (*Myosotis*) can give the scholarly observer the mild intoxication of adventure—to Merrie England and old borage remedies; to France and her "plante sudorifique"; to Moorish Spain and convivial *borrachos*; to Arabia concocting jaundice medicine; to Italy where Roman tongues twisted a foreign term from the eastern provinces, while in Greece, Hellenic tongues did the same. The mucilaginous, sudorific, emollient, cooling, stimulating, hirsute borage carries a story in its name.

Cotton is equally revealing. The Arab long ago knew *qutun*. If he affixed the definite article it was *al-qutun*, which became Spanish *algodon* and Portuguese *algadao*. Spanish cotton cloth became *coton*.

The ancient Greeks, still barbarians when the Phoenicians were civilized sophisticates, bought many a novelty from the Near East. The well-made *kitunah* became the most popular article of Greek clothing, the *xiton*.¹ The name probably came from a Semitic root, k-t-n, "to clothe." In Assyrian, a word *xatanu* meant "protect." *Xutenu* meant "protection" and, incidentally, sounded quite like the Greek *xiton* and Phoenician *kitunah*. An Assyro-Babylonian *xittu* was a "border," like the ruffles on a garment.

Through all the terms runs a basic idea—a garment; woven stuff; protection; clothing; fringe. The common throat sounds for the idea are a glottal stop, a dental, and a dental-nasal—*k/q/x/-t-n*. It became stabilized in Arabic *qutun*, and emerged in English as "cotton." Back of it was Phoenicio-Aramaic *kitunah*; and back of that, Assyro-Babylonian *xatanu* and *kitunnu*.

Speaking of cotton (of the family Malvaceae, genus *Gossypium*) reminds one that this family name, Latin *malva*, garbled into Anglo-Saxon *mealwe*, has also a distinct Near East connection. When the Greeks called mallow *malaxe*, they left a linguistic clue, pointing to some term that included an extra consonant, *x*. The Greek *malakos*, suggested "soft" and mallow has been used in medicine as an emollient. In the Greek words the extra sound of a guttural *xi* or *kappa* (*k*) is clear.

¹ *X* is used to denote the throaty, raspy, guttural, like a half-swallowed *k* or *q*, indicated by Greek *xi* and Semitic *xeth*.

Turning to Near East literature, one finds in the great book of Job (30:4) the old man's plaint that everybody laughs at his suffering, and even the "salt-weed" or "mallow" cutters deride him. The Palestinian Negeb or south country is volcanic and saline. Spring torrents bring down mineral salts from the hills. Water holes turn salty and crystals often line the edges. Even the Babylonian texts refer to this salt country. The nomad population adapted its resources to their needs. Every edible or therapeutic plant had to yield its benefit.

When Job mentioned the mallow cutters he used the term *malluax*. The final consonant, *xeth*, had much the same guttural sound as Greek *xi*. References to the salt lands in Psalms (107:34) and Jeremiah (17:6) employed the same root. In Babylonia, a *malaku* was a sailor, one identified with salty waters. In passage from the cradle of civilization to and through the Mediterranean tongues, the glottal stop, *k*, or guttural *x*, could be easily lost, leaving the softer *malva*, *malba*, and *mallow*. But the presence of the extra consonant in some of the Greek terms provides the clue pointing to oriental habitat and initial use of the mallow.

The philological background of botanical nomenclature can not be expected to provide complete implementation for habitat and dispersion studies, but there are possible suggestions. Certainly the linguist can clasp hands with the botanist when he finds basic word patterns such as *b-r-g*, *k-t-n*, or *m-l-x* stretching from Persia to the Pacific.

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NOTES ON THE FLORA OF THE CHARLESTON MOUNTAINS, CLARK COUNTY, NEVADA. IV.¹ ASTRAGALUS

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¹ Previous notes in this series have appeared as follows: Madroño 4: 128-130. 1937; Bull. So. Calif. Acad. Sci. 37: 1-11. 1938, 38: 1-7. 1939.